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THE PRESIDENCY

BY HUGH SIDNEY

'Thirsting to get into China'

There is a passage in Richard Nixon's writings where he tells about the Chinese word for "crisis," a favorite term of his in any language. That word, Nixon points out, is made up of two characters. One of them stands for "danger," the other stands for "opportunity."

That Oriental footnote, appropriately, is the clue to the President's open pleasure at the sudden renewal of contact with mainland China. In the power game Nixon plays, men are drawn to danger not only of necessity but because it provides the greatest stimulus. And China is a huge mass of unmined opportunity.

In the past decade, that vast country has held more and more fascination for U.S. Presidents. When McCarthyism faded and the men in the White House were no longer afraid to take a second look at the Chinese Communists—at least as people—most of them were willing to admit that it was ridiculous to try to conduct world affairs without acknowledging the existence of 600 to 800 million human beings.

Early in John Kennedy's term he asked for a new approach. Marshall Green, now the Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Affairs, was called back from his post as consul general in Hong Kong and put in charge of a new China office under the East Asian Bureau. Tentative ideas about letting China into the United Nations and renewing communications and trade contacts began to float about in the lower ranks of the bureaucracy. They never reached the important levels, however, and then Kennedy was killed and the effort stalled—but not before

Bobby Kennedy had become intrigued, partly because as Attorney General he had noted that the Chinese were probably the most law-abiding ethnic group in America.

Lyndon Johnson brooded about the Chinese problem. One night in his small study, he sipped at a Fresca and told some visitors that he just wasn't sure why we excluded Red China from the United Nations. "I don't know how you can ever make friends with people if you don't talk with them," he said. "And I don't know how you can talk with them if you won't let them sit down with you." That sort of country logic stunned the old-line State Department officials. Nevertheless, Johnson was eventually intimidated by them. "The diplomats tell me we can't do it," he said, "so I guess we won't." But he never lost his curiosity about China. Through spy planes and satellites he noted every move that was made as China prepared and tested its nuclear weapons at Lop Nor. "Why," he said once, "we can tell when they go to the latrine."

It is another of the ironies of history that the old Red fighter, Richard Nixon, should come along and be the one to shake the Chinese hand. Twenty years ago Nixon was roaring that if Taiwan fell, "the next frontier is the coast of California." Ten years after that he was still insisting that recognition of Red China would be "detrimental to the cause of freedom and peace."

Californians have a special possessiveness about Asia because they live on the Pacific.

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By 1967, when Nixon was writing in *Foreign Affairs* that Red China should be brought into the family of nations, he was already setting himself up as an expert.

Because of his anti-Communist background, he could pull it off more easily than others, he told people around him. He talked for long hours about how everything "came together" in mainland China: how Russian and United States interests met, and those of Japan and Indonesia. Nixon was swept along, too, by what one of his men describes as "that certain magic of China." There is a smell of adventure about China and Nixon is a kind of gray-flannel explorer. He became interested in Chinese civilization and concluded that the Chinese were perhaps the most talented, energetic and creative of Asian peoples. Out of that came his political conclusions: that no stable world order was possible without mainland China, that Russia should not necessarily be our preeminent Communist contact, that China's isolation had produced an ignorance about the United States among her leaders that had to be dispelled.

Nixon plunged into the job of opening Red China and dragged the rest of the government along. Spiro Agnew was not the only one who had doubts about such a departure. Other Cabinet officers and diplomats clung to the old belief that the Red Chinese were pretty good enemies to have. Less than a year ago, however—in the midst of the Middle East crisis—the President leaned back in his chair in the Oval Office, picked up a paperweight and thumped the top of his desk with it. "Russia isn't going to make any effort to get China into the family of nations. It is up to the United States. We have got to start the dialogue. Maybe it

won't happen in five years, maybe not even in 10 years. But in 20 years it had better be, or the world is in mortal danger. If there is anything I want to do before I die, it is to go to China. If I don't, I want my children to."

That message was sent to the mainland in every conceivable manner, including that delicate and deliberate gambit of using the phrase "the People's Republic of China" rather than "Red China." Nixon himself penned that into his toast to Romania's President Nicolae Ceaușescu. American journalists missed the significance of it. Nixon's men made certain the Romanians did not. They pointed it out to Ceaușescu, knowing the word would go quickly to Peking.

Right now Nixon is like an eager tourist—"thirsting to get into China," says one of his people. He has a thing about entering new places. Four paces before he reaches any doorway he straightens up, shifts his ambulatory gears, goes through the door with power. Aides have learned to clear the aisles when Air Force One puts down at some distant airport. In a new country like Romania or Yugoslavia he comes out of the cabin door like Stanley discovering Livingstone. China would be the ultimate entrance.

His chances of getting there soon are remote, of course. But like any traveler who has got the taste and has studied the folders, he keeps hoping. The thought of the traveling White House—with its horde of advance men, its caravan of jets, its army of photographers and reporters—was enough to make Henry Kissinger wonder good-naturedly if several years of careful preparation weren't necessary before even China could survive such an assault.